DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INFORMATION

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS SECTION

DPI/NGO/SB/91/22

UNITED NATIONS REGIONAL COMMISSIONS: THEIR FUNCTIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

(Not an official record or press release. This summary is made available to NGO representatives for their information and free dissemination).

On 13 June 1991, Mr. Benny Widyono, Director, and Ms. Harriet Schmidt, Senior Economic Affairs Officer, of the New York Office, United Nations Regional Commissions, briefed NGO representatives on the functions and responsibilities of the United Nations Regional Commissions.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE COMMISSIONS

Mr. Widyono said the United Nations has established five regional commissions to provide focal points for regional economic and social development: the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), established in 1947 at Geneva; the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), established in 1947 at Bangkok; the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), established in 1948 and located at Santiago; the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), established in 1958 and based at Addis Ababa; and the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), established in 1973 and headquartered at Baghdad, now with operations out of Jordan.

The regional commissions are subsidiary organs of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). According to Mr. Widyono, their combined staff accounts for more than half of all United Nations staff in the economic and social areas. The combined budget of the five regional commissions amounts to 45 per cent of the United Nations budget in the economic and social sectors, or 12 per cent of the total budget of the United Nations.

In 1977, the General Assembly gave the regional commissions primary responsibility for economic and social development within each of their respective regions. Since 1978, they have also been the executing agents for projects of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Each of the five regional commissions has its own ministerial conference, which governs its activities. The regional commissions report to ECOSOC.

Mr. Widyono said it is important that the countries within the regions identify with the commissions and send ministers or other high-level officials to their meetings. ESCAP, the ECE and the ECA meet annually, while ECLAC and ESCWA meet biannually.

Problems of economic and social development are best addressed at the regional level, Mr. Widyono said, because it is easier for the regional commissions to cooperate with the governments involved.

Because of the diversity in each region, the regional commissions address a broad range of issues. For example, prior to the political changes in Eastern Europe which occurred in 1989, ECE dealt primarily with East-West relations. Since then, the character of ECE changed completely. The ECE now promotes technical assistance to Eastern European countries.

FUNCTIONS OF THE COMMISSIONS

According to Mr. Widyono, the regional commissions have the following functions:

1) to forge agreements and conventions;
2) to act as "think tanks";
3) promote cooperation initiatives;
4) to act as clearing-houses for information;
5) to provide technical assistance.

The commissions have placed a special emphasis on integration and development of economic infrastructure, particularly in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. ESCAP and the ECA played an important role in the formation of the Asian and the African Development Banks, respectively. ESCAP, responsible for an area covering one quarter of the earth's land area and 56 per cent of its population, also functions as an intergovernmental forum. The commissions foster cooperation between governments, both at the national and local levels. In Asia, for example, groundwork laid by ESCAP resulted in a conference of major metropolitan area officials to discuss traffic problems.

The regional commissions also conduct research and economic studies. For example, ECLAC was successful in proposing specific initiatives to address the Latin American debt crisis in the 1980s.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE COMMISSIONS

According to Ms. Schmidt, each of the commissions has its own policy-making organ, executive direction management, and fairly autonomous administration. Each commission administers from 10 to 15 substantive programmes.

Sector programmes are implemented in a multi-disciplinary way; the commissions often exchange information with other offices within the United Nations system. The Department of International Economic and Social Affairs (DIESA) uses statistical data gathered by the regional commissions to gain a global perspective of economic and social conditions.

Ms. Schmidt said that the regional commissions have evolved in different directions. Factors influencing these changes include their location, the history of each commission's respective continent, the degree of development, and the daily changes in political or economic outlooks. Only the structures of the commissions are similar; different mechanisms have evolved for conducting business.

The composition of the membership in each commission is also very different. ECA has no non-regional members, while ECLAC is comprised of Latin, Caribbean, North American, and several European countries. The membership of former colonial powers, including certain European countries, provides an interesting mix. Asia has developed countries and developing countries, both as full and associate members.

Ms. Schmidt said that the degree of coordination among member states varys from one United Nations body to the next. Within the United Nations system, the General Assembly is supreme, although the Economic and Social Council governs the work of the regional commissions. Regional commissions must coordinate their activities with regard to the decisions of both bodies. However, access to other budgetary resources has increased the flexibility of the regional commissions in implementing their work programmes.

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